GASPARD

By Rene Benjamin

A Soldier of France

SUMMARY OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS.

The story of Gaspard is the story of a country going into war. The mobilization call of August, 1914, comes to the little town of A—— in Normandy. How the heart of each one hears and accepts the call is a picture of what would happen in any town in the United States were the country to be plunged suddenly into war. Then comes the contingent from Paris with which the recruits of A—— are to serve. And with them comes Gaspard, snail dealer in the Rue de la Gaite in the Montparnasse quarter, "with a nose like a hook and a face that would make a fish laugh."

He is the life of the regiment. He believes his company, the Twenty-fourth, to be the best company in the army, his captain, Puche, the greatest captain in France. His two friends, Burette the journalist and Moreau the stage hand, the finest pals in the world. Gaspard, because he is willing, not because of any culinary ability, is company cook and general factotum. Even Capt. Puche, earnest, methodical product of the military school, depends upon him for everything. His coming, and his lighthearted badinage cheer the fainting spirits of the provincials, called suddenly from their little stores and narrow lives into the unknown maelstrom of war. The regiment entrains for the front. Outwardly a happy, laughing, joking, carefree lot; but in the heart of each is that which he does not dare to have his fellows see. But they believe themselves straight on the road to Berlin. The alboches cannot shoot, their shells do not explode, 100,000 of them have fallen before Liege, they will run at the first fire, a revolution has broken out in Germany. Yes, Gaspard says it is so. The regiment detrains at Rheims and then it is march, march on and on into fair Lorraine. They are going right through to Metz, Gaspard says it. As they near the front they have their first hint of the devastating effects of war; peasants in flight, the smoke of burning villages, and then the dull, distant rumble of cannon. Misgivings beset them. Why are they going in? They are of the reserve. What are the active troops doing? Perhaps the Germans are not running so fast after all. On they go, the volatile and ubiquitous Gaspard cheering them up, into the very vortex of war.

He took his friend in his arms as though he were a child and began to walk over the same ground which he had previously crossed under the enemy's terrific fire.

III.

The regiment was going through a long stretch of cultivated land without a tree, the corn and wheat fields separated by a stone cross. This is the most prosperous and at the same time the most religious part of Lorraine, a beautiful country where the horizon is so straight and the color so uniform that even in the full morning light one receives a strong impression of melancholy. A black dog was following the soldiers in the hope of picking up something to eat. Meanwhile the roar of the cannon was still going on and the men looked almost as worried as the dog.

After one hour of marching a halt was called and the men had a bite to eat. Only the Twenty-fourth Company was ordered to continue the march and to encamp two kilometers away at the outposts.

"No wonder!" said Moreau. "The Twenty-fourth is always the chosen one!"

Gaspard refused to worry and began a song at the top of his voice. Capt. Puche, however, ordered silence, as the Uhlans had been reported near by. He gave the order quietly, while stroking the neck of his horse, which was still dancing on his hind legs. It was in exactly the same tone of voice that he announced that "prisoners had been captured whose morale was bad, inasmuch as they had had nothing to eat."

"Best of all," he added, "their shells are not exploding," and he went on stroking his horse, calling it by its pet name Cocotte.

"Well, then, we're going to have some fun," said Gaspard.

"We are going to watch the approach to a small wood," continued the Captain. "German patrols are probably moving around there. We will have to keep our eyes open."

"That's my job," said Gaspard. "At the Halles we also have to keep our eyes open!"

This was considered as an offer to volunteer, so when the edge of the wood was reached Gaspard was sent out as first sentinel in the company of Burette. They went out laughingly, juggling with their rifles. Pinceloup watched them start and gave vent to a fear:

"Something may happen to them."

They posted themselves among the trees, two steps from a road coming out of the wood which divided the plain into two parts.

"The first one I see," said Gaspard, "I'll finish and I will cross-examine him later."

"Well, we'll see," replied Burette. "Better be careful."

"Quiet. Listen. I think I heard. Well, as to me, I'm not going to miss them. At target practice at Chalons I was right there when it came to hitting the bull's-eye. Be quiet. Listen."

"Why, you're the one who's doing all the talking."

"Be quiet, I tell you. I hear something moving."

"It's a rabbit."

"It's coming nearer."

"Two rabbits."

"Fool! How many bullets have you got?"

"Ninety."

"Gee, what a fool! How many bullets have you got in your rifle?"

"Eight."

"Eight and eight are sixteen. Good! Sixteen bullets for the first one we see. Be quiet. It's probably a cavalryman. Now, pal, I'm going to aim for the first shot."

"Don't be a fool!"

"Oh, look here!"

"What?"

"A woman!"

"Sure? Call her."

"Don't move. Can you see her? Is she pretty?"

"You bet!"

"But she might be a boche."

"You poor fool! Eh, mademoiselle!" "Come here, sweet stranger, child of my heart."

"Where are you going, mademoiselle?"

They came out from the shelter of their trees and emerged on the road, where they saw a young woman, possibly a young girl, with a sweet face, who seemed amazed at the sight of the soldiers. She said:

"Soldiers! Will you give me some information, gentlemen?"

They replied together:

"At your service, mademoiselle. That's what we're here for."

She tried to speak, but had been running too fast and had almost lost her breath.

Both looked at her and both were impressed by her attractive features. She was extremely pretty and the men felt deeply moved at being so close to such an attractive person after all the hardships they had gone through. She looked at them with her great blue eyes, but without the slightest alarm.

Burette was twisting his mustache when Gaspard, less bashful, stepped forward.

"Where do you come from, mademoiselle?" said Burette.

"And where are you going?" added Gaspard. "Remain here with us. You can do our cooking. It's a pretty good thing for you that I am married."

She laughed and turned her eyes away. She was prettily dressed in a light summer frock, with bare arms and neck.

Gaspard placed his rifle against a tree, while the girl said with a smile:

"I was with my mother down there; she isn't afraid; she says she knows them, that she saw them in 1870, but I said, 'No, thanks, I'm going away.' My mother is well taken care of; she is living at the Mayor's house. They won't do her any harm. And then . . . she is pretty old . . ."

Again she turned away from the men.

"Yes," replied Burette, "whereas with you they might have been different. . . ."

"What are you talking about?" exclaimed Gaspard. "Are you mad? A pretty little girl like this for the boches? Why don't you talk sense?"

"Well, you never can tell."

"Just let them come, let them touch her! For the boche! . . . I'd rather give oysters to my janitor's cat."

The girl was greatly amused at this dialogue. She said:

"Well, gentlemen . . . I'm going to try to reach Verdun . . . Is this the right way? . . . Well, good luck . . . if you get into the fighting . . ."

"But . . ." exclaimed Gaspard, "you're not going to go away without giving us a kiss!"

"Gentlemen, I am in a hurry."

"It won't take you long to give a kiss!"

"I must reach my destination before to-night as I only have the password for the day guards. . . . You two have such good faces that I didn't bother about it. But if I find any sentinel giving me ugly looks I'll lose no time in saying, 'Turenne!'"

"Turenne? Why, it isn't Turenne to-day," said both soldiers together.

"It isn't Turenne?"

"No, it's Marceau."

"Marceau? . . ."

She looked them straight in the face as though afraid that they were trying to fool her. Meanwhile Gaspard put his arms around her suddenly and gave her a big kiss on the cheek, adding:

"Why, yes, it's Marceau!"

"Well, then, give me the other cheek!" said Burette.

He seized her by the waist, but she escaped, laughing, calling out "Au revoir" as she ran along. They remained there, looking foolish.

"Gee, she was pretty! . . ."

"Pretty! . . . Well, you bet!"

"What a beauty!"

Two men came up to relieve them, to whom they said:

"Open your eyes, pals. There are some mighty pretty girls going through here. . . . If you'd only seen the beauty we've just been talking with."

They went back to the other men in a jolly mood.

Their comrades were fast asleep and they followed this example. Soon, however, the sergeant called them.

"Eh, you . . . the Captain wants you."

"The Captain? . . . He gives me a pain. . . . What does he want?"

"It seems there is a story of a spy, a woman they have just caught. Didn't you two see a woman? . . . They say she was pretty, and I hear she was hiding two homing pigeons in her waist. It didn't show a bit; she only seemed to have a pretty figure."

The sergeant was nervous. This first story of the war had excited his imagination, and the two others, who were rubbing their eyes, were listening to him with a stupefied look on their faces. Gaspard said:

"But . . . what did she look like?"

"I don't know. I didn't see her. Did you?"

The two men stood up. Then Gaspard with both hands in his pockets replied in his most natural voice:

"My, that's a funny story! . . . What does it all mean?"

"Believe me, it's no story," said the sergeant. "She ever knew the pass word, Marceau. . . . It surely is the limit. . . . And when she was arrested she opened her shirtwaist and the two pigeons flew out together."

The two soldiers kept staring at him with big eyes. The sergeant grew angry.

"You make me tired! You don't even understand what has been explained to you. Go on back to sleep. I'll tell the Captain that you are two fools!"

He went away and the two men went back to the ditch in which they had been lying. After getting as close together as possible Burette said in a murmur:

"Say . . . it's terrible. . . . What a story! . . ."

Gaspard, who was both frightened and disgusted, replied:

"It's enough to make any one sick! . . . We'll be pretty lucky if we get out of it like this. . . . If this is war, good night!"

After a few minutes he added:

"That sure is the limit. . . . And such a pretty little woman too! . . . A fine kind of a specimen. . . . And pigeons! . . . What do you know about that! . . . And we poor fools thought she had such a beautiful figure!"

The gods were good to Gaspard, for the afternoon went by without any further call for explanation from the Captain. At nightfall there were other things to worry about, for the gunfire was getting closer and closer.

The greater part of the regiment was now at the outpost and it was rumored that the men were going to advance still further; it appeared that a battle had been fought and that a General was calling for fresh troops, and the men's imaginations were working overtime in an effort to picture to themselves the scene of a battle, with its terrific dangers and its dead.

Suddenly, just as they were finishing a bad soup prepared by Gaspard, there came before their eyes a vision which was enough to brighten every heart. A handful of mounted Chasseurs came from the very midst of the distant firing line, where they had had a hot encounter with the Uhlans. Barely 200 in number, they had cut down 1,500 of the enemy. They were about thirty when they returned, but they presented indeed a wonderful, stirring sight!

Their horses, covered with dust and blood, came charging along as though they knew what had happened and were proud of their riders. They dashed by in a wild rush, while their riders, without caps and their hair flying to the wind, laughed, shouted and screamed. They brought with them triumphantly three riderless mounts, which excited great interest among the infantrymen.

"Uhlans' horses?"

"You bet they are, and no mistake!"

The infantrymen opened their eyes and their mouths, and Gaspard exclaimed:

"You bet they're German. Look at their mugs!"

All the men agreed that the horses did look ugly, not on account of their saddles or bridles, but because they looked like real German, real boches.

Still this was only the first beginning of the war. The Chasseurs were merely a warning that the enemy was near by, but the regiment was soon to meet him.

It was an unpleasant night, dull and heavy, with a storm threatening. The sun had disappeared behind reddish gray clouds and the air was oppressive. The men had nothing to say, but remained with eyes and ears open, frightened and worried. Toward 11 o'clock in a pitch dark night the march was resumed. From time to time a stroke of lightning illuminated the sky, lending an even more tragic look to the stupendously dramatic situation.

The noise made by the iron shod boots of the soldiers was all that could be heard as the men marched along like a crowd of shadows. The effect was formidable and terrifying.

Suddenly, brutally, the horizon became red and the men exclaimed:

"The swine are setting fire again!"

Five seconds later, without the slightest warning, the regiment found itself face to face with another body of troops, several thousand active soldiers who were coming back from the battle line. Their condition was pitiful. This time the war was brought right home to the men. They realized that they were no longer on their way to the front, but that they were actually there, right in the midst of war with all its terrors and its horrors.

For these men they had just met were no longer an army, but just a crowd of suffering human beings, wounded, exhausted, limping and dragging themselves along, with blood spotted bandages around their limbs or their heads. Some were piled up on carts with creaking wheels, others came along in closely formed groups as though they were holding each other up. Their first question upon meeting the men who were going to take their places at the front was: How far away was the nearest village?

Gaspard replied:

"You'll be there in a minute. Don't worry."

He questioned the men one by one.

"Where do you come from? Where have you been? Why are you so worn out?"

The others in pitiful accents replied:

"We were twice as many when we went out. We got it good and hard. Avenge us, boys!"

Moreau, discouraged, said:

"Well, are we lost?"

"You idiot!" exclaimed Gaspard. "Didn't you hear what the Captain said? Their shells are not exploding!"

"No, I didn't; let's ask them."

He called out to the returning troops:

"Hey, pals, are their shells exploding?"

But there was no reply. All that could be heard from the passing men was the same question:

"Where is the nearest village?"

Romarin, the young barber's assistant, encouraged his comrades, saying:

"We'll get them!"

Meanwhile Capt. Puche, whose horse was frightened, continued to stroke his neck, showing not the slightest sign of alarm.

What proved most discouraging to the men was the fact that these wounded, the first sinister victims of the battle, kept on coming along from everywhere, crowding the fields and the roads. The men had never felt so depressed, and for the first time the weight of the equipment seemed enormous to every man in the ranks. They felt their hearts weakening, their spirits gone, their souls bursting. On they went without a stop, without a rest, with nothing to eat but the loaf of bread in their canvas bags. The sergeant overheard a remark.

"It's pretty sad to have to put up with this kind of food."

"What's bad is to have to listen to such fool talk."

After a few minutes silence the men turned against Gaspard, agreeing with Pinceloup that his cooking was no good. Sharp remarks were passed, several men declaring they were sick and tired of the hot water which Gaspard was serving to them as soup, but there was no reply from the cook, who seemed to remain indifferent to the attack. A period of silence followed, during which a pair of jaws could be heard in action.

"Who's eating?" some one called out.

"I am," said a soldier named Courbecave. "I am finishing my bread. It's darn sight better than the soup."

Gaspard had not a word to say, but he understood that after this nocturnal outburst—the only time in which the men would have had the courage to attack their cook—he would never have the heart to boil water and peel onions. Half of his power had suddenly collapsed.

Too tired or too proud to exhibit his anger in front of the others he confided his feelings only to Burette, for whom his friendship was ever growing. Burette was a pal who "knew how to talk, had a lot of instruction and didn't put on any airs." When Gaspard thought of his friendship for Burette he forgot all about every one else in the regiment, including even Moreau. No one else was of any account. Speaking to Burette he said:

"They're a fine lot of ungrateful brutes! . . . I've worked like a slave for them. Why, only yesterday they were all flattering me. But now that they begin to see the danger they all turn against me. I tell you they're a lot of brutes! But don't worry; if they have no one but me to cook their meals they won't have a chance to eat too much. . . . See, now, we're going on. Fine! We're going to fight. I'm for it. Half of them will be killed. Great!"

It was Burette's turn to laugh.

"You can do the cooking for the two of us. Beginning to-day you will be my cook, but you will have to live up to it. For to-day I would like a volau-vent with a bottle of Bordeaux wine."

"Oh, don't get funny."

"I would like a good little lively wine."

"It would be all right if we just had to go along with our hands in our pockets and nothing to worry about . . . but what do we look like? . . . Less than nothing—cannon fodder, that's all . . . And only three months ago we were electing Members of Parliament!"

Dawn was breaking and the men were beginning to be able to see each other. All of a sudden in the light of the gray morning the regiment realized that they were no longer alone on their march. Along a parallel road with long lines of trees on each side other bodies of troops could be seen advancing in the same direction.

In the morning no more wounded were to be seen. The rising sun was directly in front of the men. They were marching toward the east and seemed to be leaving the black night behind them, together with the distressing convoys of wounded. The men were breathing more freely. They felt stronger and more determined. They knew they were going to their destiny, but it seemed this morning rather more like victory than disaster.

The hearts of the bravest, however, were to be subjected to another test almost immediately, for the regiment turned suddenly into a large field situated between two woods, where 200 Frenchmen three days before had been caught and mowed down to the last man by a division of Uhlans who had dashed into them with their lances and revolvers. The Frenchmen had tried their best to defend themselves; they had fought valiantly and had sought shelter in vain, and the traces of their terrific struggle could be seen on all sides. They had built impromptu breastworks and fought until the last bullet was exhausted and had been killed one by one.

This field, torn to pieces by feverish hands, by men clinging to the earth as a drowning man will hang on to a straw; this field was the living image of 200 men who had died in a desperate attempt to protect the first corner of France against the invader. Of their heroic effort there was nothing left but this torn up field; they themselves had disappeared, buried under the soft soil in order to make room for those still alive who were to follow the wonderful example they had set.

Here the regiment realized in the most dramatic manner the full extent of the tragedy of war. A chill, almost a shiver, ran through these 2,000 men and the entire column stepped suddenly out of the way as a supreme tribute to the men buried in these anonymous graves over which not one of those still alive would have been willing to pass.

The guns were getting closer and closer and heaven and earth were trembling. After passing the field where the 200 had died the regiment went through a small wood and suddenly came face to face with the battery of 75s. No shot was being fired from them; the men were waiting and watching.

"The battlefield at last!" said Gaspard. Capt. Puche, who was consulting his map, called a halt and replied quietly:

"Yes, here we are."

But the regiment went on. They advanced a few hundred meters so as not to be in the way of the artillery. The men sought shelter behind huge piles of red building stones.

"All we have to do now," said the Captain, "is to wait . . . and watch."

He was still smiling and his little round eyes were shining, eagerly awaiting what was going to happen. Two men assisted him to the top of one of the stone heaps, where he sat down, opened his map and raised his field glasses to his eyes with a satisfied smile indicating his delight at the prospect of seeing at last that for which he had been waiting for many years. From the top of his observation post he lined up the men, permitted them to take off their haversacks and ordered the soup to be made.

All eyes were turned immediately toward Courbecave, who had declared that he would rather eat bread. Gaspard turned away, whistling a tune.

Courbecave was a bricklayer from Versailles, conscientious and attentive, who had from the start realized the shortcomings of the cook and had always envied him his honorable, although perilous, position. He was prompted by pride. He had already confided to two or three of the men:

"I know how to fry potatoes . . . and some potatoes! When I cook a piece of meat I don't spoil it."

He had nothing but meat at his disposal and no potatoes. He emptied into the boiling pot all that was left in his canvas bag, including some carrots, three onions and a few bits of chocolate. One of the other men, on going through his pockets, found two potatoes half squashed, which he added to the mess, and Courbecave finally put into the pot two or three pounds of soldier's bread.

"I'm going to make you a real soup which will make your mouths water."

The men began at once to sing his praise without regard to Gaspard, who pretended to be asleep.

"Talk about cooking! Now we're going to have the real goods!"

One of the most enthusiastic flatterers of the new cook went even so far as to add:

"We'll ask the Captain to taste it."

They called the Captain. From the top of his stone heap he called out:

"Why, it's a treat just to look at. But beware! If the boches see it through their glasses! . . ."

Every one laughed. The little cook raised his head full of pride. And no one was afraid, although the shells were coming closer. Capt. Puche could see them from his observation post and was thus getting his first vision of shell fire before being subjected to it himself. But he was not in the least surprised and maintained the same calm, undismayed attitude which he had assumed ever since the beginning. He was looking ahead with his small eyes, where no trace of alarm could be seen, and a smile on his lips, through which no cry of fright or terror was ever to pass. Straight ahead. Only one kilometer away he could see the great white clouds of smoke from the German shells, and although he remained quite serious, his seriousness was not caused by any feeling of fright, but merely by the determination of a loyal chief to do his duty. In a quiet voice, so as not to frighten the men, he said:

"Hurry up, boys, if you want to finish your meal before beginning the fighting."

It was true that from one minute to another the order to move on might come. The enemy was increasing his fir and Puche could see through his glasses French regiments who were already advancing under the attack.

I was his duty to await with his company the call for reenforcements.

With their rifles between their legs the men were seated along the side of the road, while on the other side the little bricklayer, all alone, was preparing the soup, which he was stirring with a piece of wood.

The care with which he went about his work was immense. He seemed to put all his soul into the preparation of this meal under the eyes of his comrades. These soldiers, ready to fight, had no thought as to whether or not they would be killed. Their main source of worry was whether they would have time to eat first. Every once in a while some one would call out to the cook, "How goes it?" and the cook would reply, "Fine! it's beginning to look good."

He went about his work as if he had been making bricks; he wanted the soup to be thick and nourishing.

But while they were admiring him with all the strength of human egotism it came to pass that this handful of Frenchmen, even before they had time to think of it, received their first baptism of fire in the most unexpected and the most horrible manner. Gaspard, who had actually fallen asleep, awoke suddenly. He was saying, "Are we soon going to get after the boches?" when suddenly the sky seemed to be torn apart by that queer whistling noise which several generations will remember all their lives. A shell came along, the first of many to follow. A shell came, landed, roared and exploded . . . the little cook was wiped off the surface of the earth.

The company remained silent, terrified, horrified. Some of the men had thrown themselves face down in the mud and remained there, hiding their eyes in the ditch. . . . Slowly they looked up, one by one; they watched the smoke of the death dealing missile slowly drifting away; and their terrified eyes could see nothing but bits of human flesh at the spot where their cook had stood. The scene was so horrible that Gaspard was trembling all over.

And then . . . as no other shell came along and the silence was restored to such an extent that a bird could be heard singing; and as the hunger still remained and the big boiling pot, thanks to some freak of luck, was intact, still sending skyward an appetizing cloud, the Captain, in a low voice, ordered that the pot be removed and carried 100 meters away.

In the soup they found three bits of iron and a soldier's button, which they showed to each other without a word of comment. Gaspard, with tears in his eyes, fished out with his spoon a little black ribbon from which was suspended one of the small identification medals worn by the soldiers of France. It bore the inscription, "Courbecave, 1905." Poor devil, so proud of his cooking; in his death he had signed his first and last soup.

Puche, by this time, had stepped down from his stone heap. He came slowly toward the men. Gaspard, whose heart was bursting with anger, exclaimed in an ugly tone of voice:

"Captain, why did they tell us that their shells did not explode? Why do they tell us that?"

"Gaspard," replied the Captain, "this is no longer the time to ask why. (Another shell exploded with a terrific report only fifty meters away.) We haven't even the time to eat. Turn the pot over."

"Turn it over?"

"Yes."

From the manner in which the last word was spoken it was clear that the decision at which Puche had arrived was irrevocable. Gaspard hesitated only a second and then upset the pot, but not before having rescued a large hunk of steaming beef, which he placed in his canvas bag.

"Pick up your arms, my boys," said the Captain, "and form fours."

The men obeyed the order in a deathlike silence. The Captain, however, remained just as calm. Just at that moment he was endeavoring to remove with his finger nail a small spot on the sleeve of his tunic.

"Form fours," he said, "and in good order."

Pinceloup grumbled:

"We're going to be killed here. Why don't we move?"

Gaspard replied in a tone of supreme contempt:

"Don't cry, baby, we'll take you back to your mother."

"Come on," said the Captain. "Line up."

Even the bravest felt a shiver pass through his body and a feeling of revolt in his heart. It seemed horrible at such a time another shell had just exploded twenty-five meters away and attach any importance to foolish details.

"Attention . . . Parade rest! . . . Attention! . . ."

The men obeyed, scandalized.

In no uncertain voice the Captain continued:

"Shoulder arms!"

He repeated the same order three times over.

Even Gaspard, failing to understand, was disgusted. Burette, terrorized, was looking at the blue sky, which seemed greater than ever. His face was beating quickly. He was beginning to live through what seemed to be an astounding nightmare. He listened to the shells coming along and was saying to himself: "Are we going to die? . . . Yes? . . . No? . . ." He lowered his head while the Captain's voice again was heard:

"Present—arms!"

He as well as the others obeyed the orders. Suddenly in the midst of deadly silence, while all the men were anxiously awaiting a change, which might be, a murmur was heard between two shells.

"Attention," said Puche. "We are going to start. We have one and a half kilometers to cross under fire."

The report of an exploding shell silenced him for a moment, after which he repeated:

"The fire is not violent . . . and after all we are at war . . . There is nothing to surprise us. Form fours and advance in sections."

He took out his whistle, motioned the men forward without uttering a word and with his eyes glued to his map started out ahead of the men through an open field.

Moreau remarked:

"We're in for it now."

Gaspard replied:

"Not even time to fill a pipe."

Moreau continued:

"Where is our artillery? They could give us a damn for us!"

"Well, we don't give a damn for them!" said Gaspard.

The Captain blew his whistle, gave a signal to the men in reply to which they all dropped flat on the ground. A shell came along with some whistling noise, and burst a corner of the field further on.

"Poor aim!" said Gaspard, much to the left."

He was sneering and all the others in whom this first contact with gunfire was working an enormous change